DAWN

OPINION

More than words

IT appears that 'dialogue' is fast becoming a buzzword in the federal capital. After both the treasury and opposition benches signalled their openness to negotiations, others have jumped into the fray. The newly formed so-called National Dialogue Committee hosted its own event in the federal capital this Wednesday to discuss the possible pathways to reconciliation. The committee, led by estranged PTI leaders Fawad Chaudhry, Imran Ismail and Dr Shahzad Waseem, concluded its deliberations with a call for the release of all political prisoners as a way to lower temperatures. There were several other leaders present at the conference, including former prime minister Shahid Khaqan Abbasi, former Karachi mayor Waseem Akhtar, ex-PTI leader Sher Afzal Marwat, and Jamaat-i-Islami's Liaquat Baloch, among others. But while these leaders may have arrived with the right intentions, they lack the clout to make any real difference.

There is, of course, no harm in hosting events like these. The conference, for example, came up with the suggestion that the government and opposition may negotiate with each other through their respective 'dialogue committees'. It even named the government panel, nominating President Asif Ali Zardari, PML-N President Nawaz Sharif, and Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, while leaving the opposition team to the recommendations of the PTI's jailed leadership. But though the suggestion sounds positive on paper, it remains a non-starter given the prevailing political climate, which all but precludes any possibility of the political leadership sitting down at the same table with the opposition. It was telling that the opposition's main alliance, the TTAP, stayed away from the NDC conference, as did the government and its allied parties. The NDC also misjudged by suggesting various preconditions for the start of negotiations, such as the release of prisoners. Durable solutions only come from dialogue without any strings attached, yet many keep missing this point.

The very next day, it became clear how deep the chasm still is between the rival camps, when Punjab Police was accused of arresting political workers by various opposition parties ahead of the TTAP's announced 'mobilisation drive' in Lahore. The reports started emerging while a TTAP convoy, led by its chairman, Mahmood Khan Achakzai, was en route from Islamabad to the Punjab capital. The affected parties were quick to call out the Punjab government and PML-N leadership, and it appeared that the apparent easing of tensions witnessed in recent days may have evaporated amidst the chaos. It remains to be seen whether the ruling parties will attempt to smoothen things, but what has become clear is that the path to any negotiations is as uncertain and fraught with difficulties as before. Till an effort by both sides is genuinely attempted, initiatives like the NDC conference will amount to little more than headlines.

Riverine criminals

THE Sindh government's decision to launch what its home minister described as a "massive operation" to eliminate bandits in the *katcha* areas along the Indus marks an important turn in the province's fight to reclaim the state's writ from riverine criminal gangs. The minister vowed to use state force to eliminate the *katcha* dacoits and their facilitators, and permanently destroy their hideouts. The resolve expressed by him to ruthlessly crush the criminals underscores the provincial leadership's renewed political will to put an end to heinous crimes such as kidnappings for ransom, highway robberies and murders in the area. This is not the first time the province has launched a police operation against the riverine criminals who have operated in the area for decades with impunity. What distinguishes the current drive — if the Sindh government's claims are taken at face value — is the apparent realisation by the political authorities that only a large-scale, sustained operation can address the problem.

While Sindh's decision to equip police personnel assigned to the operation with modern technology and weaponry reflects its resolve, the success of the operation will depend on the law enforcers' own capacity and training to sustain such an undertaking in a tough area for several months. The threat of *katcha* bandits is not confined to Sindh. It poses an even greater challenge in southern Punjab, where repeated operations have failed to remove the menace. It is well established that *katcha* gangs operating in Sindh and Punjab maintain deep links and routinely seek refuge in each other's areas of influence whenever they come under pressure from the law-enforcement agencies. Past experience also underlines that police operations separately carried out by Sindh and Punjab have not produced the desired results. The lack of coordination between them has allowed criminals to temporarily move to the other province and to return when matters stabilise for them in their respective areas. The minister's acknowledgement of Punjab's support in a recent "successful" operation, which cleared a "no-go *katcha* area" and recovered from Punjab some who had been kidnapped from Sindh, shows how interprovincial cooperation can yield results. Given the cross-provincial nature of the riverine belt it would have been better had the two coordinated more closely and launched simultaneous operations in their jurisdictions to end this shared menace.

Pre-monsoon audit

THE NDMA's decision to launch a nationwide Infrastructure Audit Programme before the monsoon is a welcome step. It suggests a shift away from routine warnings towards real action. The programme reflects a lesson Pakistan has learned the hard way: natural hazards turn deadly when roads, buildings and public facilities are ill-prepared. The floods of 2022, the destructive monsoon episodes of 2024, and fresh warnings of heavier rainfall in 2026 show that extreme weather is becoming all too frequent. In this context, the NDMA's plan to inspect high-risk and heavily used buildings is timely. As the federal housing minister noted at the launch, many losses are not caused by nature alone; they also result from unsafe construction, poor maintenance, and infrastructure that fails under predictable stress. Auditing such assets before disaster strikes is a sensible place to begin.

However, Pakistan's real problem has never been a lack of plans but a failure to implement them. Frameworks are announced but responsibility often fades once action is required at provincial and district levels. The new programme will only matter if its findings lead to actual decisions. Unsafe buildings must be repaired or closed, resources must be directed where risks are highest, and political pressure should not override safety concerns. Earlier warnings about a harsher monsoon show us that time is available, but is often wasted. Early alerts mean little if drains remain blocked, encroachments untouched and evacuation plans unenforced. Infrastructure audits must, therefore, be backed by clear timelines, enforcement and public accountability. Otherwise, they risk becoming another report that gathers dust. Urban centres, in particular, cannot continue as they are. Karachi's drainage failures, Lahore's unchecked construction and Peshawar's strained public buildings show the cost of delay. The NDMA has offered a pathway. Whether the state follows this path or again waits for the floodwaters to arrive will decide how much damage the next monsoon causes.

BY ZAFAR MIRZA & MIFTAH ISMAIL

People are eating less

Macroeconomic repairs are being carried out by impoverishing the people.

ON Jan 1, the government launched the results of the *Household Integrated Economic Survey2024–25* under the subtitle of 'Data-driven insights for inclusive growth' — though we are moving in a direction opposite to inclusive growth, as the *HIES* data itself shows.

Before moving further, we appreciate the fact that *HIES 2024-25* has been done, and technically speaking, done well. It is statistically sound and representative as it covers 32,000 households across the country and across the five socioeconomic quantiles covering both urban and rural Pakistan. And, it's for the first time that the *HIES* has been done digitally. The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics deserves appreciation.

The six highlights adorning the official press release of the launch as milestones are: three percentile points increase in literacy; two per cent points decrease in out-of-school children and three points increase in the use of clean fuels. Household internet access has jumped from 34pc to 70pc and individuals using the internet has increased from 17pc to 57pc. These are indeed improvements. But then, full immunisation of children improving five percentage points and moving from 68pc to 73pc actually means that 27pc of our children are still not fully immunised. We also know where most of the unvaccinated children are: some 57pc of children in the erstwhile Fata agencies (now districts) and almost two-thirds of children in Balochistan are not fully immunised. But the highlights or milestones of *HIES 2024-25* are still shallow waters. Real sharks lurk in deep waters. *HIES* has indeed been successful in "capturing real lives through real data".

One key revelation of this survey is that the average monthly household income in Pakistan more than doubled between 2018-19 and 2024-25 — from Rs41,545 to Rs82,179. This is a 97.81pc increase. How nice it sounds that, on average, households are now making more money. In terms of income distribution, in 2024-25, the poorest quintile was earning an average of Rs41,851, while the richest was earning Rs139,317 — nearly three times higher. Inequality is more pronounced in the urban areas, where the richest households earn well above Rs146,920, and the poorest remain below Rs42,412.

But then, average household consumption expenditure increased by 113pc during the same period. In 2018-19, an average household in Pakistan was consuming or spending Rs37,159 per month; in 2024-25 it was consuming Rs79,150. Overall, as compared to 2018-19, the poor households in the first quintile showed an increase of 84pc, while the rich households in the fifth quintile showed an increase of 131pc, demonstrating a widening increase in consumption between the rich and poor.

The net result of the so-called increased household income and even greater increase in consumption is that in the last six years, an average Pakistani household has become poorer and lives a more difficult life. How much poorer? Let's see.

The real story is hidden in real income values by controlling the inflation effect, ie, comparing *HIES 2024-25* income data with 2018-19 prices. This comparison shows that on average people are poorer today than they were in 2018-19. Except for the richest 20pc of rural households all others, poor and rich in both the urban and rural areas, have lost out on their incomes.

The worst affected are the poorest urban citizens who have lost 23pc of their real income. In 2018-19, the average poorest urban household earned Rs24,365 whereas in 2024-25 the same household made Rs18,820 in 2018-19 prices. The average urban citizen became 19pc poorer and the average rural citizen 7pc poorer in the intervening six years.

Even more disturbing is how this relative poverty is affecting real lives. The major share of household income in terms of percentage is being spent on basic food items — 36.72pc, which is a bit more than in 2018-19, and yet, they are consuming less food than they were six years ago. A table (37.C) in *HIES 2024-25* tells this sad story. Per capita consumption has gone down in almost all main food items. For example, in 2018-19, the average urban Pakistani was consuming 6.12 kilograms of wheat but in 2024-25 s/he was consuming 5.67 kg. All per capita consumption values of essential food items — including, rice, pulses, milk, mutton, beef, chicken, eggs, potato, onion, sugar and tea — have gone down in the last six years in both the cities and the rural areas. The only exceptions to this sad trend are tomatoes and cooking oil.

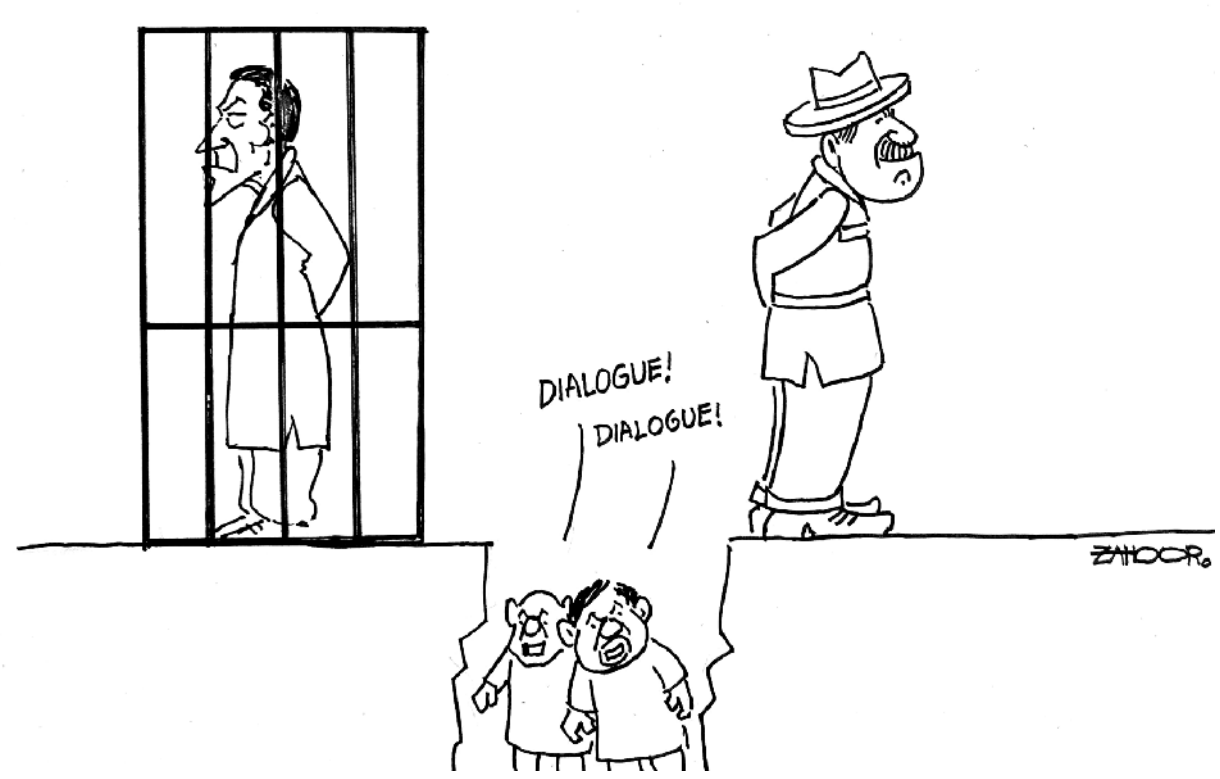
In essence, Pakistanis are spending more and eating less than they were six years ago. The prevalence of food insecurity has increased from 15.9pc in 2018-19 to 24.4pc in 2024-25, according to the survey. They are also now spending less on education than they were in 2018-19. Almost 4pc of household expenditure went into education six years ago, which declined to around 2.5pc. Household health expenditure being relatively inelastic has slightly increased from 3.22pc to 3.34pc.

HIES 2024-25 shows that macroeconomics and household economics are at odds with one another. Macroeconomic repairs are being carried out by impoverishing the people through high direct and indirect taxes and extremely high and exploitative utility bills. The salaried class is worst hit. Macroeconomic stability is destabilising the people.

The current government has to shoulder the responsibility of this sad state of affairs but the reality is that our economic woes are rooted in the extractive economic system we have been pursuing, our perennial governance issues and — the mother of all issues — our chronically unstable politics.

Pakistan desperately needs deep, consistent and sustainable structural reforms in all these domains for which a national consensus needs to be established through a national dialogue among all stakeholders. The seriousness of our social, economic and political issues is such that these cannot be left to one government alone. All parties and state institutions need to sit together and develop a long-term development plan and firewall it against any change of government and any political turbulence. Unless we do this, the people will continue to suffer. The measure of national success should be how a poor household prospers in real terms rather than how successful we are in obtaining another debt tranche from the IMF. ■

The writer is a former SAPM on health with ministerial status, adjunct professor of health systems and president of the Pakistan Association of Lifestyle Medicine.
Miftah Ismail is a former finance minister.



BY TAHERA HASAN

Excluded from healthcare

WOMEN'S access to healthcare in Pakistan is shaped not only by poverty, but also by the intersection of documentation, marginalisation and gender. After more than a decade of work in one of Karachi's largest informal settlements, it has become evident how the absence of identity documents interacts with restrictive social norms and institutional power imbalances to systematically exclude women from public services. Insights from a community-based maternity home reveal that women's avoidance of healthcare is less about awareness and more about fear, administrative exclusion, and the everyday costs — financial, social, and emotional — of navigating systems that were not designed with them in mind.

Women consistently report feeling safer and more willing to seek care when maternity services are located within their own communities. Proximity reduces travel costs, but more importantly, it limits exposure to spaces where women anticipate scrutiny and judgement. Despite this, reliance on traditional birth attendants, or *dais*, and home births remains widespread. These choices are often dismissed as backward or uninformed. In reality, they reflect rational decision-making in an environment where institutional healthcare is frequently experienced as punitive rather than protective.

Home births are not chosen because women are unaware of the risks. Families are acutely conscious of the dangers of maternal and infant mortality, unhygienic practices, and delivery-related complications. What weighs more heavily, however, is the fear of mistreatment within formal health facilities. Women describe being spoken to harshly, questioned about their morality or marital status, and made to feel unwelcome. For many, the prospect of humiliation — particularly in male-dominated, overcrowded public hospitals — is a stronger deterrent than the clinical risks of delivering at home.

This fear is reinforced by the real costs of accessing Pakistan's public healthcare system, even where services are officially free. Travel, repeated visits due to referrals, diagnostic tests, and the time spent away from household or income-generating work can make a single hospital visit a significant burden for low-income families. The cumulative impact of transport, lost wages and logistical challenges often makes seeking institutional care a difficult and sometimes untenable choice.

Documentation acts as a further and decisive barrier. While policy may not always mandate identity documents for maternity care, in practice CNICs, marriage certificates and other paperwork are routinely demanded. Front-line discretion determines access and undocumented women are frequently delayed, discouraged, or turned away. For women without CNICs — many of whom belong to historically marginalised or stateless communities — health facilities become sites of anxiety rather than care.

These administrative barriers are deeply gendered. Women are more likely than men to lack documentation, and more dependent on male relatives to obtain or present it. When documents are missing, women bear the burden of explanation and negotiation. In maternity settings, this vulnerability is heightened. The fear is not only of being refused care, but of being reported, questioned, or publicly shamed. Stories of such encounters circulate quickly within communities, reinforcing collective avoidance of formal healthcare.

> Documentation, fear and gender keep women from accessing healthcare in Pakistan.

For stateless and undocumented populations, the consequences are particularly severe. Statelessness does not simply limit mobility or access to education; it directly amplifies maternal risk. A woman without legal identity is less likely to seek antenatal care, more likely to delay seeking help during complications, and more vulnerable to being excluded at critical moments. In these cases, the link between legal identity and survival in childbirth is stark but largely unacknowledged in policy discussions.

Private healthcare, often presented as an alternative, offers little relief. Costs are prohibitive, and there is growing concern about the routine medicalisation of childbirth. Families report being pushed toward caesarean sections even when normal delivery is medically viable. Decisions are poorly explained, consent is often perfunctory, and costs escalate rapidly. For women who already feel powerless within healthcare settings, such experiences deepen mistrust and reinforce the perception that institutional care prioritises profit or control over patient well-being.

At the core of these experiences lies the question of dignity. Women from low-income and undocumented backgrounds repeatedly describe being treated as burdens rather than patients. Communication is minimal, empathy scarce, and accountability weak. These interactions mirror broader social hierarchies, where class, gender, and legal status intersect to shape who is deemed deserving of care.

The persistence of home births and reliance on *dais* should therefore be understood as a symptom of systemic failure. Pakistan's health system remains heavily oriented towards tertiary care, while primary and community-based services — those most accessible to women — remain underresourced and undervalued. Weak referral systems, inadequate oversight of front-line behaviour, and the exclusion of undocumented populations from planning processes allow these patterns to persist.

Reframing the issue is essential. Women do not avoid healthcare because they are careless or resistant to modern medicine. They avoid it because the system exposes them to indignity, financial strain, and administrative risk. Awareness campaigns alone cannot address this. What is required is health system design that recognises documentation as a barrier, addresses gendered power dynamics, and treats dignity as integral to care.

Until healthcare can be accessed without fear, without hidden costs, and without proof of legal belonging, avoidance will remain a rational response. The true measure of a health system is not the sophistication of its hospitals, but whether women — regardless of status — feel safe enough to seek care when it matters most. ■

The writer is a lawyer and founder-CEO of Imkaan Welfare Organisation.

E-Mail: Editorial: editor@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Islamabad): re.isb@dawn.com | Resident Editor (Lahore): re.lhr@dawn.com | Karachi: city@dawn.com | Tel: (021)35670001 | Fax (Edit) (021)35682187 | UAN 111.444.777
(Management) (021)35683188, (Advt): (021) 35683801 | Marketing (Karachi): mktg@dawn.com (021)35613099 | Marketing (Islamabad): mktg.isb@dawn.com (051)2202701-5 | Marketing (Lahore): mktg.lhr@dawn.com (042)111-444-777